

# U.S.-Supported Iraqi Opposition

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On February 6, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that the U.S. would resume funding opposition efforts inside Iraq for the first time since the Iraqi army overran the rebels' main base in 1996. The next day, Sharif Ali Bin Al-Hussein, spokesman for the umbrella opposition Iraqi National Congress (INC) proclaimed: "It's a different ball game now. It's tangible how big the change is." Ten days later, as U.S. fighter jets bombarded Baghdad suburbs, INC leaders met with U.S. State Department officials to discuss funding details. But despite the public show of strength and unity, Bush administration officials were quietly describing the INC as "the gang that couldn't shoot straight"-so hapless, corrupt, and unpopular both within Iraq and with neighboring states that the State Department was out searching for other Iraqi dissidents to support.

Over the past several decades, U.S. support for the Iraqi opposition has blown hot and cold. Four months before the 1990 Gulf War, two Republican senators visited Baghdad and reassured Saddam Hussein that Voice of America broadcasts criticizing the regime's human rights record did not necessarily reflect U.S. government policy. When the Gulf War ended, President Bush called on Iraqi dissidents to rebel, implying that the U.S. would provide air cover. The uprisings materialized, but U.S. air cover never did. When the Iraqi military retaliated, butchering thousands of rebelling Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south, U.S. officials claimed that Bush favored a military coup within the regime, not a popular insurrection, which Washington feared would lead to a possible breakup of Iraq and a destabilization of the regional power balance. Internal Iraqi coups were reportedly attempted in July 1992, July 1993, and May 1995. Each ended with mass arrests, executions, and the restructuring of the ruling Ba'ath Party's security apparatus and tribal alliances, but with Saddam Hussein's regime intact. Most disastrous was a 1996 covert U.S. military training operation in Arbil in northern Iraq that degenerated into internecine feuds. Saddam Hussein's forces crushed the INC, forcing its operations to come to a standstill.

During the early 1990s, the U.S. spent over \$100 million to aid the Iraqi opposition. Most of this money was for public relations and propaganda, not military hardware. In 1998, Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act, which allocated \$97 million for Pentagon training and used military equipment. But the INC has been slow to take advantage of Pentagon training, to submit proposals, or to complete audits, so most funds remain unspent.

There are over seventy opposition groups within and outside Iraq, representing a diverse network of religious minorities, Iraqi

monarchists, and military exiles. The U.S. has long played favorites, pitting these groups against each other. The Clinton administration selected seven for assistance, foreseeing the INC as the umbrella organization.

#### Key Points

- \* The Bush administration has pledged to resume funding opposition groups inside Iraq for the first time since 1996.

- \* Most U.S. support goes to the Iraqi National Congress (INC), an umbrella organization that has little or no internal support and has proved inept, slow, and, many contend, corrupt in utilizing U.S. funds.

- \* Over the past few decades, U.S. has repeatedly urged a popular uprising and then failed to provide military support.

Iraqi National Congress (INC), a London-based coalition founded in 1992 in Vienna with 87 members in its National Assembly. Since then, a number of participating groups have dropped out. It is led by Ahmed Chalabi, a shadowy Shiite mathematician frequently described as a limousine insurgent or an armchair guerrilla. Chalabi was indicted in Jordan for embezzling millions from a bank he once headed.

Iraqi National Accord (INA), headed by Iyad Alawi, consists primarily of military and security officers who defected from Iraq. Started in 1990 with support from Saudi intelligence, it was reorganized in 1996 by CIA, British MI-6, and Saudi intelligence operatives and infiltrated by Iraqi intelligence in 1996, leading to its devastating defeat.

Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), headed by Muhammad Baqir HaKim, is backed by Iran, is headquartered in Tehran, and has its base of support among Shiites in southern Iraq.

Movement for Constitutional Monarchy is led by Sharif Hussein, a member of Iraq's deposed royal family.

Islamic Movement of the Iraqi Kurdistan, led by Sheik Ali Abdel Aziz, is backed by Iran and based in Halabja, site of a 1988 chemical attack by the Iraqi army that killed thousands.

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by Jalal Talabani, has drawn support from Iran.

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), led by Masoud Barzani, is one of the oldest opposition groups and is also supported by Iran. In 1974, based on promises of arms and support both by then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and by the shah of Iran, the KDP launched its first attacks against Iraq's military. When the U.S. and Iranian help didn't materialize, the Iraqi government forcibly resettled 600,000 Kurds from northern Iraq.